

# PUBLIC MEETINGS AND HEARINGS

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**R**egularly scheduled public meetings are one of the most basic duties of the municipal planning commission. Not only are they required by law, they are also effective venues for citizen participation. In addition, the public meeting is the basis for the public hearing, which is specifically intended for gathering public input. Together, public meetings and hearings are the backbone of community involvement in the municipal planning process. It is essential that they be conducted with the utmost preparation, fairness, and efficiency. This factsheet compiles information from various sources to provide tips on how planning commissions can best make use of public meetings and hearings as vehicles of citizen participation in the municipal planning process.

## A Quick Look

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## A Planning Commission Meeting: Basic Steps

- 1. Begin meeting with introductions of commissioners, staff, the audience, and special visitors.**
- 2. Approve minutes of last meeting.**
- 3. Review meeting agenda—add any additional items raised, if possible.**
- 4. Begin addressing agenda items in sequence.**
- 5. Address last agenda item that time allows.**
- 6. Quickly debrief issues addressed and input given.**
- 7. Set or reinforce the agenda, date, time, and place for the next meeting.**

## A. Anticipated Outcomes

A public meeting can facilitate citizen input in many ways. A resident may show up at your next regular meeting, seeking a place in the agenda to bring an important issue to light. At the other end of the spectrum, your planning commission is required to hold one or two full public hearings to solicit public input on imminent revisions to the municipal plan.

Like a community planning survey, input gathered during a meeting will likely consist of the various preferences of the participants. Meetings and hearings are normally driven by rules for fairness and time-efficiency that do not allow for the degree of participant sharing that can tease out underlying community-held values that may come out of other more interactive public involvement activities, such as community visioning events. While the rules in play at most meetings may limit the depth of public input, they are meant to ensure that everyone gets to say their piece in a timely and orderly manner. (Tips on meeting rules can

be found in section D: Degree of Participant Interaction.) Public meetings and hearings are also governed by laws to guarantee citizens adequate notice of meetings and the chance to attend and take part. (See box below: *Basic Legal Rules for Public Meetings and Hearings.*)

### **Basic Legal Rules for Public Meetings and Hearings**

In Vermont, Planning Commissions hold regular meetings at least once a month. The Planning Manual for Vermont Municipalities states the following:

1. A schedule of the regular meetings must be posted in a public place.
2. Any changes or additions to the schedule must be posted at least 24 hours in advance.
3. Planning Commission meetings are open to the public under Vermont's Open Meeting Law (1 V.S.A. §310-314).
4. Only special topics (1 V.S.A. §313) can be considered in executive session and closed to the public, and no binding actions may be taken.

Planning commissions are also required to hold at least one public hearing during the course of the municipal plan adoption process. A municipal plan revision hearing requires the following:

1. a warning published and posted in a public place at least 15 days before the hearing,
2. information in the warning about what the public is invited to comment on (revisions to the municipal plan), and
3. copies of the revisions made available for public perusal (normally in town clerk's office).

The planning commission can hold other hearings on other topics, if so desired. Public hearing notice requirements can be found in 24 V.S.A. §4447.

(Source: Vermont Department of Housing and Community Affairs, 2000.)

### **Tips for the Agenda**

The meeting agenda controls the issues that can be addressed and can have a significant impact on both the amount and quality of citizen participation. An agenda that does not allow for public participation will not encourage input, while one packed with major community issues could simply result in an exhausting meeting for the commissioners and audience. Clearly a balance must be sought. Here are some agenda tips:

- Address only one "controversial" issue per meeting and schedule all items that may warrant public input at the beginning of the agenda to prevent audience impatience. (Source: Cogan, 1992b.)
- Near the beginning of the meeting, publicly review the agenda and allow audience members to suggest additional items, typically under "new business." Plan to address these items at the end of the meeting. If time does not allow for that, or if further exploration of a topic is needed, make sure the leftover business is carried over to the next meeting's agenda.
- In terms of "locating" times for public input, try to open each issue to audience commentary at some point in the process.
- While public hearings require published warnings, consider voluntarily posting agendas for regular meetings to solicit public input.

### **B. Flow of Information**

Ideally, the format and conduct of a public meeting will allow for a two-way flow of information. The planning commission can use the meeting to inform the public of various issues, and community members are allowed to give their input and (if time allows) put new issues on the agenda. The ultimate control of the meeting, however, lies with the planning commission's chairperson. Even with legal statutes ensuring the public's ability to attend open meetings, public input can be stymied by the chair's conduct. This is also possible in the case of public hearings, which are convened for the sole purpose of gathering citizen testimony. While rules may be put in place to keep meetings respectful and effective (see section D), your planning commission should not let time-efficiency completely eclipse citizen participation. Your planning commission's meeting rules, like the agenda, should be designed to give the public ample opportunity and time to speak if they so desire.

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Planning commissions may want to provide different input vehicles, such as written statements, questionnaires, sketches, etc. (Source: Cogan, 1994b.) Here are a few other tips for ensuring the quality of information being communicated from the planning commission to the public:

- Use handouts freely to give participants background information on the meeting's proceedings.
- Use lay vocabulary and avoid using "legalese" or "plannerese." Follow up any technical content by paraphrasing to the audience.
- Plan ahead and be sure that everyone in the planning commission and audience has an equal view of any displays or presentations. (Source: Cogan, 1992b.)

### Shifts in the flow

If the public meeting is the only citizen participation tool your planning commission uses during the process of writing a municipal plan or dealing with any other planning issue, then it is crucial that you pay close attention to the flow of information during public meetings and direct the exchange to meet the needs at hand. For example, as your commission begins addressing revisions to the town plan, you may want to conduct your meetings in a manner suitable for collecting a wide range of input and ideas from the public. This will allow your commission to incorporate as much community input as possible when identifying problems and setting goals. As the process progresses and your commission begins to develop alternatives and consider implementation, your meetings would benefit from a design that allows for more of a two-way flow of information—one in which the commission reviews possible town plan text with the attending public, and then welcomes input that is more specific and applicable to the issues set before the audience. Designing your public meetings to suit the needs of different steps of a planning process is most effective if your commission clearly states the purpose of each meeting in the agenda and any public warnings, thus alerting the public to the type of input you are hoping to collect.

### C. Scope of Work

The amount of work needed to prepare, conduct, and debrief a public meeting varies. A regular planning commission meeting should be routine, while a public hearing will require more effort. Nevertheless, like other citizen participation strategies, a public hearing entails planning and work.

A series of steps needed to pull off a good public meeting is outlined here. You may find that some of them are better suited to a public hearing than a regular commission meeting.

1. Set the date, time, place, and agenda. Normally this is accomplished at the end of a previous meeting.
2. Do any 'homework' and familiarize yourself with the issues at hand. Review information with your planning staff. (Sources: Cogan, 1994a; Riggins, 1994.)
3. Post and publish the meeting warning or notice in the local newspaper, town hall, municipal website, etc.
4. Prepare handouts, questionnaires, etc., for the public.
5. Make final preparations for any speakers, presentations, or displays.
6. Confirm the meeting facilities and set-up.
7. Conduct the meeting or hearing.
8. Create a report or minutes of the meeting proceedings.
9. Present or publish the report or minutes publicly.
10. Send thank you notes to collaborators and, when feasible, participants.

### Some Tips from a Vermont Regional Planner

*"Towns love maps; they benefit if you can bring stuff that will inspire their thinking: photos, maps, charts, videos, or site visits. It also helps if you can bring information that will answer their questions instead of having to say: 'I'll send you that' or 'Go to this website.' If you're going to use something as an example, having it with you expedites the process and builds respect for the consultant or regional planner. Holding the meeting where the project is located has advantages: You don't have to describe the situation; it's there before you."*

—Kathleen Kanz, Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commission, 2003

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## **Tips for Planning Commissioner Conduct**

- Do your homework.
- Be on time.
- Dress well.
- Do not mingle with the audience.
- Show respect for the chair.
- Be attentive, polite, and impartial.
- Watch your body language.
- Remember participants' names (use last names as default).
- Do not interrupt a presentation.
- Do not become involved in altercations.
- Do not be harsh or vindictive.
- Do not indicate how you intend to vote.
- Vote by roll call.
- Do not show displeasure or elation.

### **... especially for chairs:**

- Begin the meeting with introductions; make note of and remember names.
- Strive to be neutral; leave your personal opinions behind.
- Display energy and enthusiasm for what you are doing.
- Stick to the agenda.
- Move the meeting along; maintain a balance between dialogue and time.
- Require someone to be recognized before they speak; do not allow for interruptions or side conversations.
- Be consistent; expect equally respectful behavior from the commission and the audience; give the public as much chance to speak as commissioners.
- Seek to synthesize and summarize input from the audience and commissioners; capitalize upon common understandings and the valid opinions made.
- Move on from issues that become too heated; call for recess to calm the proceedings.
- Maintain tight control over public hearings.

(Sources: Cogan, 1992a; Gillies, 1998; Riggins, 1994.)

## **Taking care of the amenities**

If it is within the resources of your planning commission, you may want to consider the following list of details that will encourage attendance and ensure audience comfort during public hearings or any regular meetings where you desire public input.

- Light refreshments will give impatient audience members something to occupy themselves with until their desired agenda items are addressed, and water is a must for any event where people are expected to speak.
- Look into the possibility of providing child care in a room or building adjacent to the meeting space. This way, parents of young children will be more likely to attend and participate, and others in the audience will not be distracted by the assorted noises of infants and youngsters. However, be careful not to discourage interested children from remaining in the audience, and be sure to obtain permission from necessary town officials before offering the child care.

The reality in most Vermont towns is that, in the winter, public meeting spaces are kept at a temperature only warm enough to keep the pipes from freezing when not being used. Then in the summer, old buildings can grow quite hot. It might be a good idea to send someone to the meeting space a half-hour or so before the start time to begin warming the space up in the winter or to ensure proper ventilation during the summer. As a meeting convenes, you are responsible for audience comfort; do not hesitate to oversee the adjustment of controls during a meeting or even to find a different, more accommodating space if the need arises.

## **D. Degree of Participant Interaction**

While some citizen participation strategies, like visioning events, provide a venue for citizens and commissioners to share input with each other intimately, most public meetings put a limit on the depth of such interaction.

Public meetings are normally governed by rules that operate under a few different ideals:

- The meeting proceeds in a timely manner.
- The items on the agenda are addressed.
- Everyone is allotted an equal opportunity and length of time to speak.
- The meeting proceeds in an orderly fashion.

- Proper respect is paid to the chair, and thus the commission and one another.

Using a set of meeting rules can help prevent any heated debates or arguments from erupting between participants and/or commissioners and thus disrupting the order and effectiveness of the meeting. In fact, some commissions insist that all comments be directed to the chair. Commissions that conduct regular meetings with a degree of informality may still wish to establish very strict rules for full public hearings. All rules should be introduced proactively at the beginning of the meeting, rather than reactively when they suddenly become necessary.

*Robert's Rules of Order* is one of the classic standards for parliamentary meeting procedure, giving us familiar terms like "motion" and "second." However, those rules are normally followed loosely by local boards, if used at all. (Source: Gillies, 1998.) Whatever set of rules your planning commission abides by, the most important thing is to state them and follow them consistently (Source: Cogan, 1994b), especially during public hearings. Regardless of the rules used, many tips for commissioner conduct can help nurture proper meeting interaction. (See boxes: *Some Tips from a Vermont Regional Planner* on page 3, and *Tips for Planning Commissioner Conduct* on page 4.)

## E. Degree of Citizen Empowerment

We have explained the importance of rules of conduct in public meetings and hearings. Normally a meeting or hearing is a vehicle for public input convened at the behest of, and under the control of, the planning commission and its chairperson. The power that the process gives to citizen participants does not extend beyond their rights to attend the meeting, to seek information, and to give their input. This places meetings and hearings in stark contrast with more collaborative activities covered in this handout series.

Public meeting format gives citizens no authority over any planning or process decisions made. However, the tips given in this pamphlet can help prevent public disillusionment in the process, especially if you do the following:

- Sit commissioners and participants at the same level or even the same table: Citizens will physically feel that they are on equal ground with the commissioners. (Source: Cogan, 1992b.)
- Vote by roll call: Citizens may not be able to vote, but the voting process should be transparent and

not hidden from them.

- Publish reports and summaries of citizen input: Assure participants that your commission was listening and that their preferences are being shared with the community at large.

## Resources for Citizen Planners

### Organizations:

Your community's Regional Planning Commission (find it at [www.vpic.info/rpcs](http://www.vpic.info/rpcs))

University of Vermont Extension (find the office nearest you at [www.uvm.edu/extension](http://www.uvm.edu/extension))

The Vermont Institute for Government  
617 Comstock Rd., Suite 5  
Berlin, VT 05602-9194  
Phone: (802) 223-2389 or 1-866-860-1382 (toll-free)

The Vermont Secretary of State's Office  
Redstone Building  
26 Terrace Street, Drawer 09  
Montpelier, VT 05609-1101  
Website: [www.sec.state.vt.us](http://www.sec.state.vt.us)  
Phone: (802) 828-2363

Also check out the Vermont Planning Information Center at [www.vpic.info](http://www.vpic.info)

### Publications:

*Planning Manual for Vermont Municipalities*, 2000, from the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Affairs, Montpelier, VT. Online at [www.dhca.state.vt.us/Planning/publications.htm](http://www.dhca.state.vt.us/Planning/publications.htm)

*Pocket Guide to Open Meetings*, 1999, from the Vermont Secretary of State's Office, Montpelier, VT. Online at [www.sec.state.vt.us/municipal/handbooks.htm](http://www.sec.state.vt.us/municipal/handbooks.htm).

*Robert's Rules of Order*, Newly Revised, 10<sup>th</sup> Ed. by Henry M. Robert. Published in 2000, Perseus Books, Cambridge, MA.

*Vermont Municipal Guide to Land Use Regulation* by Deborah L. Markowitz, Esq., 1998 (revised in 2001) by the Vermont Secretary of State's Office, Montpelier, VT. Online at [www.sec.state.vt.us/municipal/handbooks.htm](http://www.sec.state.vt.us/municipal/handbooks.htm)

Also, consult the primary information sources for this factsheet listed under *Reference Information*.

## Reference Information

Primary information sources for this factsheet:

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Gillies, Paul. 1998. *Born to Chair*. Vermont Institute for Government, Berlin, VT.

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- Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies, [www.vpic.info/rpcs](http://www.vpic.info/rpcs)

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